DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 291 843 UD 026 042

AUTHOR Jaskoski, Helen
TITLE Is Writing an Appropriate Technology?
PUB DATE 24 Apr 87
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, (1st, Irvine, CA, April 24-30, 1987). For other conference papers, see UD 026 041-047.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *American Indians; Anthologies; *Appropriate Technology; Audiotape Recordings; *Ethnography; *Oral Communication Method; Performance; *Poetry; Videotape Recordings
IDENTIFIERS *Transcription Method

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses ways to think about the dynamics between oral productions and technologies for recording texts. It addresses the special problems of collecting, interpreting, and transcribing literature of North American Indians. Many of the original transcriptions of these works were done with an Indian translator for whom English was not the first language. This accounts for the incompleteness of early works. Later, when audio recordings were used, the quality of transcription improved. In the 1960s an approach called ethnopoetics further aided the transcription process by concentrating on the maintenance of linguistic accuracy and fidelity to the performance context. Now video recording technologies make it possible to have a more expansive record of oral literary productions. This technology has brought about changes in the relationship between the audience and the performer; they no longer have to be in physical contact with each other. But electronic technologies require economic considerations which plain writing did not. They also require a considerable amount of infrastructure, such as power lines which put the transcriber and the audience in a dependent position. (VM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Helen Jaskoski
MELUS
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☒ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED291843

Speaker: Helen Jaskoski
Department of English
California State University Fullerton
Fullerton, CA 92634

Is Writing an Appropriate Technology?

This talk outlines some ways we can think about the dynamic between oral productions, especially poetry, and the various technologies for recording texts. The remarks are meant to be openings for discussion rather than definitive statements.

A. Different approaches to Native American texts provide examples of the possibilities and drawbacks of different ideas about transcription.

1. Systematic attempts to collect texts of North American Indian literature began in the 1800s; Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's Algic Researches is a source today for anthologists of traditional tales and poems. Early transcribers usually relied on Indian translators for whom English was a second or even third language.

The technique of transcribing by handwriting with pen or pencil meant that either the transcription was skeletal and incomplete as the writer attempted to write down all the spoken language, or that the storyteller had to be interrupted many times, thus omitting in the text any sense of the context that contributes so much to meaning in oral lit erature. Frequently the outlines of stories or poems thus gained were "corrected" or "improved" to conform to prevailing literary tastes: translations in the style of Tennyson.

2. Around the turn of the century, concurrent with the government-sponsored projects in salvage ethnography, with the imagist and other

UD026042

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

post-romantic movements in poetics, and with the invention of audio recording devices, audio recordings followed by imagistic renderings and re-renderings of Indian texts were undertaken. Many of these revisers were not familiar with any Indian languages, but sought to improve on what they perceived as the crudely literal renderings of linguists and anthropologists. Mary Austin is an example. These projects have continued to the present, with the most well-known being Jerome Rothenberg's anthology, Shaking the Pumpkin, sometimes described as being in the Alcheringa style, after a journal published in the 70s devoted to the subject of "ethnopoetics."

The recording technologies made possible much more complete and accurate records of the verbal and other aural properties of texts. Through various print "signals" many of the transcribers and rewrite-persons working with these texts have tried to convey some of these distinctive elements of oral performance. A very questionable element in much of the translation/transcription undertaken to bring out the "poetic" oral qualities of these texts is a fundamental contradiction in the aesthetics of the two traditions: poets who work within a romantic/post-romantic aesthetic that values above all self-expression, revelation of personal emotion, and the absolute control of author over material will find their basic poetic beliefs in direct contradiction to extremely conservative traditions, which value preservation, accurate repetition, reticence on personal matters, and fulfillment of community and traditional duties over self-expression and fulfillment.

3. Since about the 1960s individuals trained in linguistics with special interests in poetry have developed an approach described as "ethnopoetics" which maintains that linguistic accuracy and fidelity so far as possible to the performance context will produce both the most respectful

and the most aesthetically pleasing written renderings of oral texts. Dell Hymes and Dennis Tedlock exemplify this approach. Their published texts include extensive commentary on performance situations and cultural information relevant to understanding the songs, stories and poems, and they attempt to use typographic devices to indicate oral cues in performance. These scholars also generally are much more sensitive to the authorial respect due to oral performers and scholars, and their texts present appropriate first-person accounts and acknowledgments of assistance; Yaqui Deer Songs published by University of Arizona press is a model to follow in transcription of oral lyrics.

The texts produced by Tedlock and Hymes suggest an esthetic problem directly the reverse of the early nineteenth-century notations. Whereas the earlier texts (and this practice has continued to the present--as in the case of a book of Hopi tales collected by Harold Courlander) often represented conflations of several variants of a story into a single "generic" tale, the ethnopoetic texts focus exclusively, and tend to concretize and finalize, a particular rendering at a particular time and place. It is as if a single director's playbook on a single performance of one particular production of Hamlet, say, were to stand for the definitive text of the play.

B. Audio and now video recording technologies of the twentieth century make possible a much more expansive record of literary production. It is now possible to "get" not only "all the words" but "all the pictures" as well. As literary critics and scholars we should concern ourselves with the dynamic between oral literatures and the various recording technologies: how each influences and has potential to change the other.

One of the earliest examples of critique of visual technology, for

instance, was the decision early in the present century by many Indian groups to prohibit any more still photography of ceremonies or in some cases any part of daily life. These peoples understood after very little acquaintance with the technology both its invasive nature and its potential for exploitation of its subjects.

There are many examples of the influence of recording technology on oral forms themselves. One of the most well known is the theory that many blues lyrics written early in the century observed a rigid four-stanza length because of the space limits of early wax-impression records: the four-stanza blues lyric then became a sub-genre in its own right. Now it is common for many American Indian observer/participants at festivals or ceremonies, for instance, to audiotape and even videotape portions of the event. One may speculate on whether the structure of songs or chants may change to accommodate the limits of recording tapes.

Writing and literacy have also influenced the composition process of oral literature. Hmong unmarried women have a long tradition of "spontaneous composition" of intricately structured lyrics on personal subjects; the songs are performed on social occasions as part of courtship customs. Traditionally Hmong girls learned from mothers, aunts and other older women through an oral process how to compose the texts, but Hmong girls educated in the U.S. now often write out their lyrics and memorize them before performing. Oral performers in other traditions report similar experiences. The simple fact that performers may for the first time see and hear themselves in performance can bring about changes in composition and style as a result of self-critique.

Easiest to see, probably, is the change in the relationship between audience and performer brought about by the technology. An unmediated oral

performance requires that performer and audience be physically present to each other, at least close enough for the human voice to carry from one to the other. Most such performances also imply a limited audience (though there are exceptions, e.g., reports of medieval sermons to crowds of thousands).

Technology means that audience and performer are not necessarily or even usually in physical proximity. In the case of blues lyrics as noted above, not simply recording technology, but the possibilities of mass marketing, influenced a change or rigidification of poetic form. Hmong customs are also changing: a young woman who would formerly have performed her songs at social gatherings to indication her marriageable status and preference in a potential spouse may now produce a tape of her song in a recording studio, and place a color shapshot of herself in the cassette case; the total package can then be sent anywhere to an interested party.

Such changes suggest that the function of oral traditions in sustaining community ties will alter as a result of the impact of technology. Even the definition of community may be revised, as more "outsiders" are permitted access to a community's traditions through the media. A particular oral tradition thus has potential for a much wider impact on other forms and other traditions as well.

These are a few of the issues I wish to raise with respect to oral literature and technology.

Question: Yaqui Deer Songs was mentioned. What are other examples of responsible translations of Native American texts?

Answer: Many scholars knowledgable in the field recommend the tales in Tedlock's Finding the Center, and the reworkings of lyrics in Hymes's book

titled 'In Vain I Tried To Tell You'. Another answer is to look to the American Indian writers who have used the texts: N. Scott Momaday, one of the best poets writing today, used a passage from Washington Matthews' translation of a Navajo chant in House Made of Dawn, and Gerald Vizenor and Vine Deloria have both spoken highly of Neihardt's version of Black Elk's story; Vizenor has also praised Frances Densmore's translations. The truth is, however, that there are no easily accessible general anthologies of good translations.

Question: Is writing an appropriate technology?

Answer: There are advantages and drawbacks. Speaker had suggested the many kinds of things that recording devices can accomplish in creating a more complete record of a single event. But the electronic technologies can presuppose economic distinctions that don't pertain to writing: they require a considerable infrastructure--power lines, hook-ups, etc., as well as sophisticated equipment and expertise in using it. All this can put a people in a rather dependent position. It is clear that whoever controls the technology then controls the art to a great extent. Pencil and paper is cheap, portable, easy to use.

Question: What kind of audio/video resources are available for classroom teaching of oral literatures?

Answer: (This question received a number of responses from the floor. Consensus was that dissemination of information on the topic was very important.)

Question: Did Hmong poets express ambivalence as many American Indian artists have to having traditional arts forms available in mass-market forms?

Answer: The subject of Hmong literature was not an area of primary research for the

speaker. However, Native Americans have often made explicit parallels between exploitation and theft of the land and material resources, and "collection" and "interpretation" of cultural resources, and the situation of immigrants would not be exactly the same. Also, everybody wants to be an Indian; every American wants to "claim" Indian themes, philosophy, etc. Hmong poetry (in contrast to needlework, for instance) has not yet become a commodity in this sense, and therefore one would not expect to find the same kind of concern for protecting it from exploitation.